



John Lewis Smith, San Francisco c. early 1870's
From the Wells Smith Family Album

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt

January 22 2026

This photograph comes from page 9 of the Wells Smith family album, a Victorian-era album that once belonged to John and Esther Wells Smith. The album has been preserved and passed down within the family. This portrait is identified as John Lewis Smith, my great-great-grandfather.

The photograph is a small cartes-de-visite, and the album copy shows noticeable age-related degradation, particularly uniform spotting across the jacket and subtle tonal irregularities. These characteristics appear to be related to the original photographic process or later environmental exposure. The image has been left unrestored in order to preserve evidence of the original studio work, including visible hand retouching around the eyes, face, and beard—a common practice in 19th-century portrait photography.

The verso of the card identifies the photographer as William Shew, whose studio operated at 417 & 423 Montgomery Street, San Francisco. Based on the studio imprint, card format, and comparison with institutional holdings, the photograph is most likely from the early 1870s.

A corresponding photograph of John Smith by the same photographer is held by the Oregon Historical Society. That copy is in slightly better physical condition and appears to be from the same sitting. And, in the institutional copy, faint traces of the same jacket degradation patterning can be observed, suggesting these characteristics are inherent to the original image rather than damage unique to the album print.

Members of the Smith family are known to have traveled to San Francisco on multiple occasions, and several additional photographs in the album of John Smith's older brothers were also taken there. This portrait fits within that documented presence, though the specific trip associated with this image is not known.



John Smith arrived in Oregon in 1853, very likely as part of the overland migration that included what later became known as the Elliott Cutoff, sometimes referred to as the disastrous “Lost Wagon Train.” While that event is not the focus here, its inclusion is important: it links the Smith family to one of the most difficult overland crossings of the period and places this later San Francisco portrait within a much longer arc of movement, settlement, and survival. Members of both the Smith and Wells family lines are associated with multiple major overland journeys, and this photograph represents a later moment in that shared history.

The Smith family made their home on a Donation Land Claim in Douglas County, Oregon. John Smith and his family were settled in the county during the mid-19th century, and his wife, Esther Wells Smith, was from [Elkton](#). The family’s early roots in Douglas County lie in the same general region between [Oakland](#) and [Yoncalla](#).

Related image:

John Smith, cartes-de-visite by William Shew, San Francisco

Oregon Historical Society (Public Domain, No Copyright – United States)



WM. SHEW,
Nos. 417 & 423 Montgomery Street.

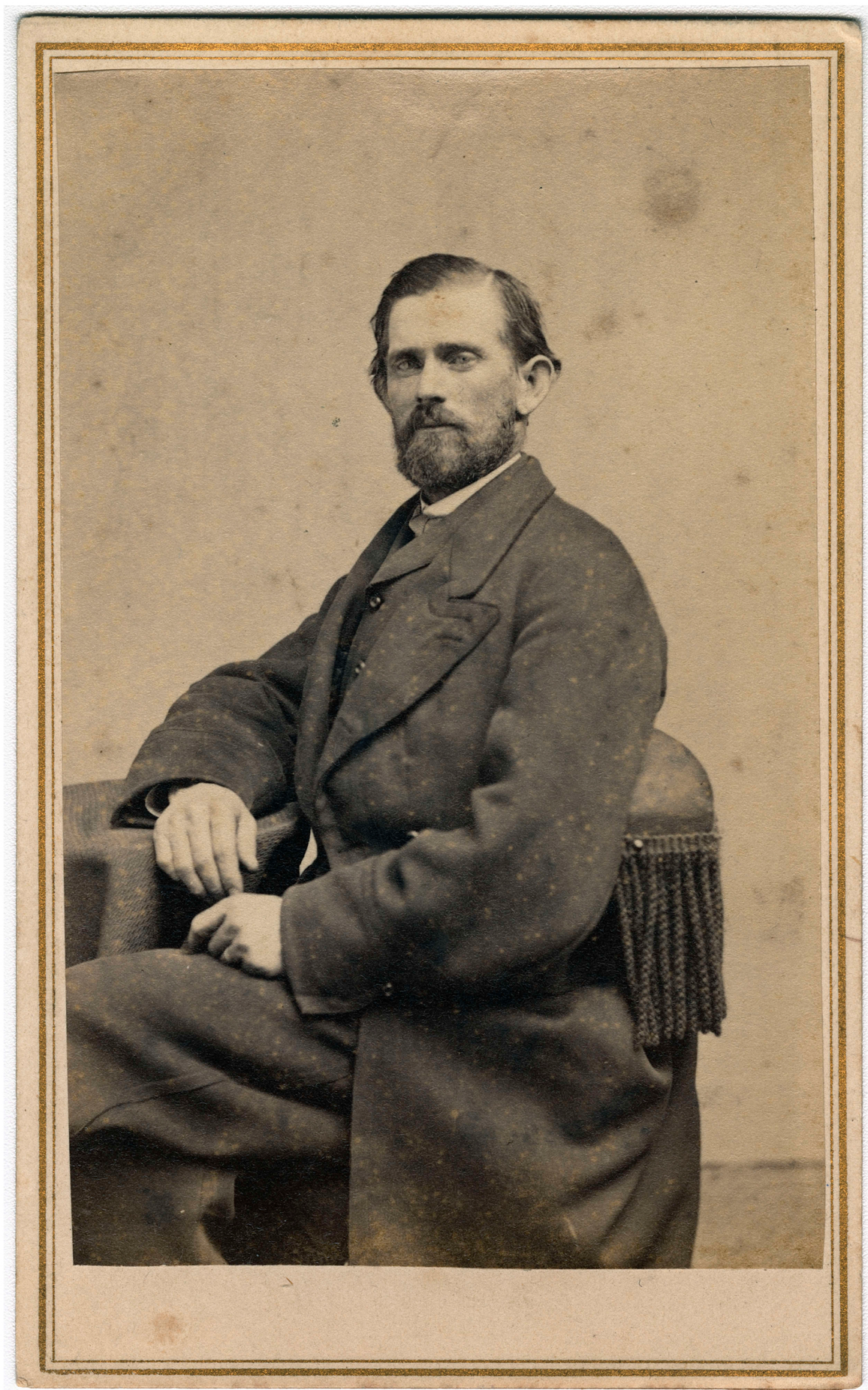
SAN FRANCISCO.

No. 21476

N. B. Duplicates of this card can be obtained by sending name and number, and an order from the party for whom it was taken.



John Smith - Wells Smith Family Album



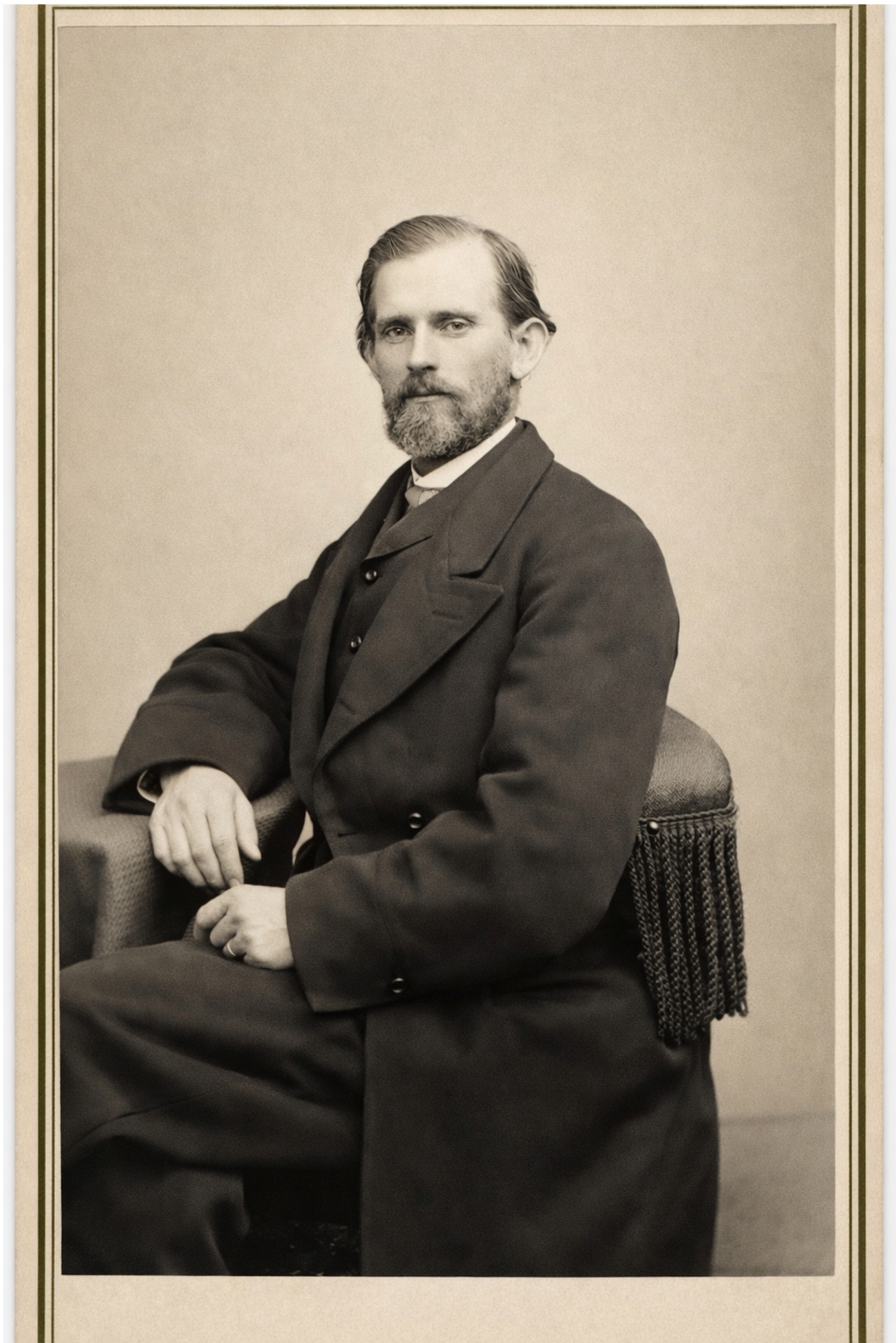
John Smith - Oregon Historical Society



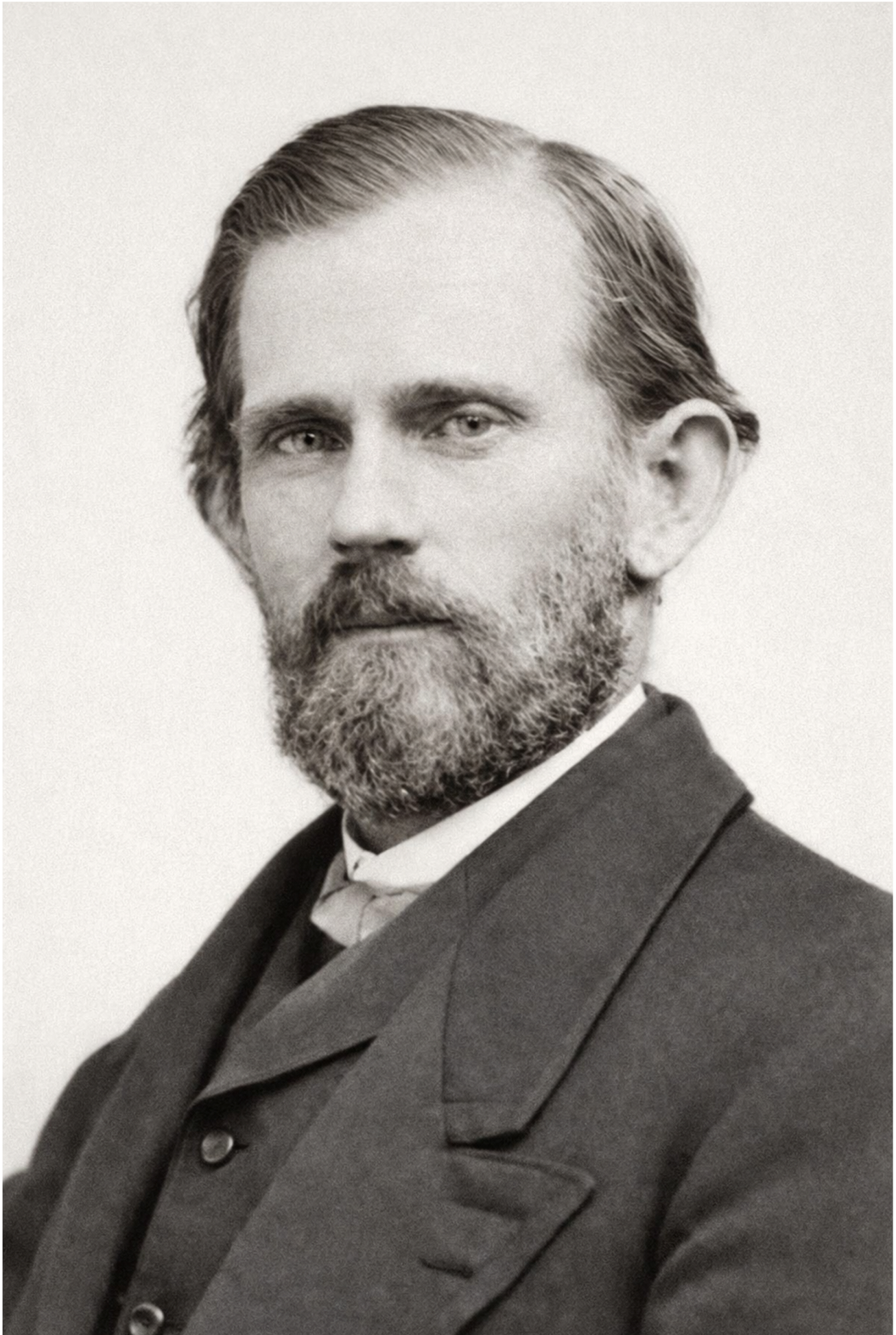
John Smith - Wells Smith Family Album



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John Lewis Smith, San Francisco c. early 1870's
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John Smith - A Stereoscopic View

Jeffrey Hunt

January 22 2026

This is an old photograph of my great-great-grandfather, John Lewis Smith.

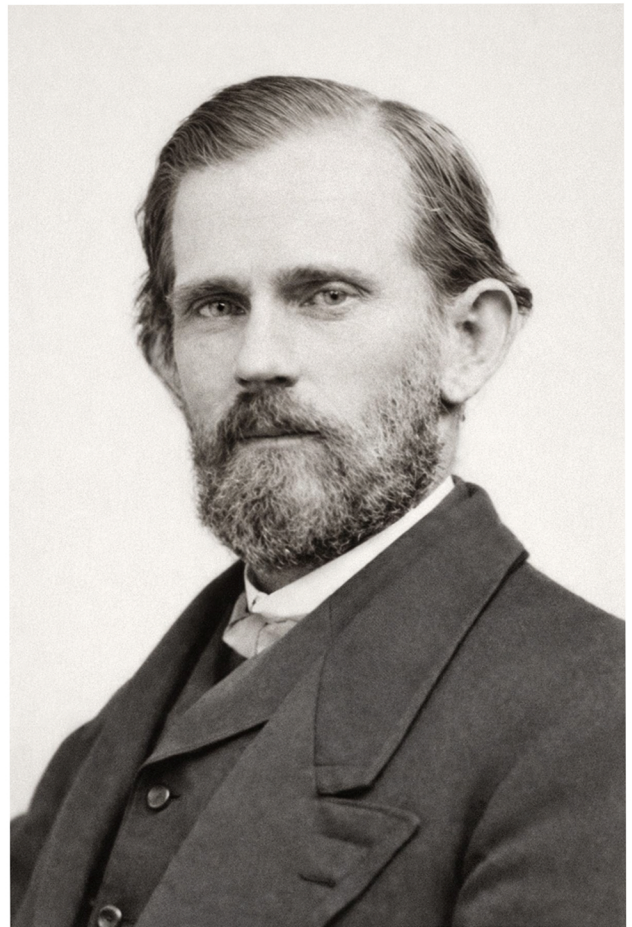
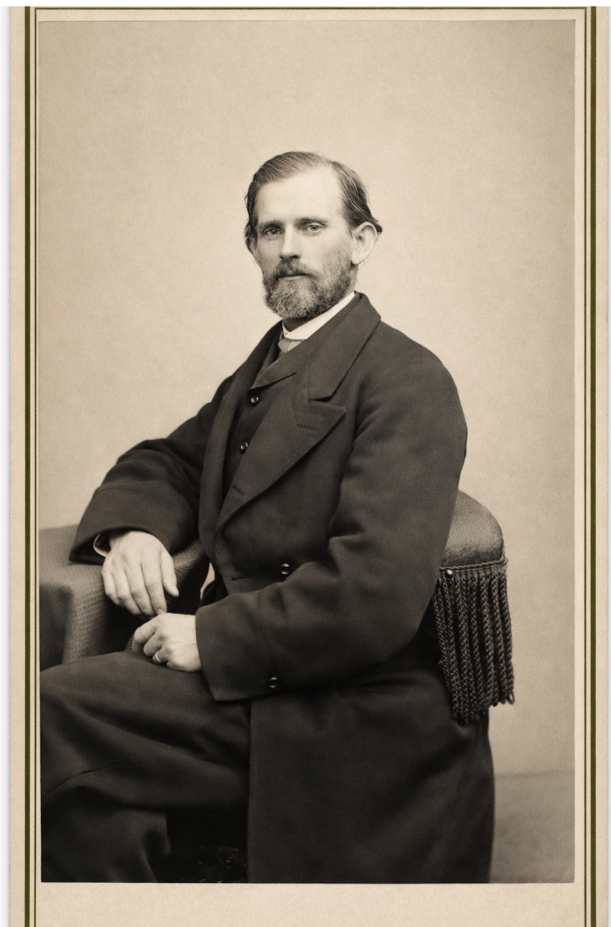
He was born in 1831 in Allegheny County, Virginia, and came west in 1853, at the age of 22, traveling with his parents. Two of his older brothers had already made it to Oregon, then crossed back to Missouri to help bring the rest of the family out.

The image in the top left is my scan from an old family album — taken in San Francisco, probably late 1860s / early 1870s, when he would've been just under forty. The second version is a light AI cleanup. The third is a much stronger AI restoration. And the last one is the “fix it all” version... fully automatic, and honestly impressive — but also unsettling, because it isn't really him anymore. It's not historically accurate. It's basically a new face. But close.

Still, even the imperfect results are fascinating. It's strange — and kind of thrilling — to see these old figures “brought forward” with more clarity, like a familiar face suddenly looking back at you. And it's a reminder that even in the 1870s, photography wasn't purely documentary. You can't zoom in very far without noticing the photographer's hand: details subtly altered, contrast pushed, even things like the pupils and beard touched up. The original photo, although only a couple of inches across, shows clear touch-up marks.

John (and other family members) made multiple trips down to San Francisco from Douglas County, Oregon, like so many others chasing opportunity in the aftermath of the Gold Rush. One of the older brothers never made it back from California — he died in Gold Country — and I'm still trying to figure out what happened.

This was a fun stereoscopic experiment... but also a weird shock: a glimpse of the past made almost too present — in seconds.



No 1 is the Original. The rest are AI assisted.



Esther Wells Smith c 1870



John Lewis Smith c 1870



Lewis Nolan Smith, infant, c 1871



John Lewis Smith copy c 1870
Original photograph likely late 1860s



Detail showing photographer's touch-up marks